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The Other Insurgency? The Greens and the Election

On 24 February 2015, the leader of the Green Party of England and Wales, Natalie Bennett, gave a radio interview that was widely condemned by the media as a ‘disaster’.¹ After being unable to specify the financial details of her party’s housing policy, she described her own performance as ‘excruciating’ and ‘very bad’, later apologising for it.² The interview even prompted some journalists to call for the Green Party leader’s resignation, blaming her for the party’s ‘bust’ in the polls.³ Yet the interview began by Bennett celebrating the Greens quadrupling their membership since 2010, up to 54,500 and beyond UKIP and the Liberal Democrats. The party had also shot up in the polls in less than nine months, from around 2% to, at one point, 10% under Bennett’s leadership. After the successful completion of the first term in Parliament of the highly popular Caroline Lucas—the Greens’ sole MP—the party was targeting up to half a dozen Westminster seats as Bennett predicted that politics at this election would ‘break wide open’.⁴ Ultimately, the Green Party, benefiting both from the downfall of the Liberal Democrats and the apologetic

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¹Thompson, B. and Aglionby, J. (2015) ‘Natalie Bennett interview disaster mars Greens’ UK election launch’, accessed at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/512598a0-bc12-11e4-a6d7-00144feab7de.html> on 13 June 2015.

²BBC News (2015) ‘Election 2015: Green leader Bennett Sorry for ‘Excruciating’ Interview’, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-31600324> on 13 June 2015.

³Crowcroft, O. (2015) ‘Election 2015: Is Natalie Bennett to blame for Green Party Boom to Bust?’, accessed at <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/election-2015-natalie-bennett-blame-green-party-boom-bust-1497385> on 13 June 2015. Myers, R. (2015) ‘Come Back Caroline Lucas, All Is Forgiven’, accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/politics-blog/11519510/Come-back-Caroline-Lucas-all-is-forgiven.html> on 13 June 2015.

⁴LBC News (2015) ‘Incredibly Awkward Interview with Natalie Bennett’, accessed at <http://www.lbc.co.uk/incredibly-awkward-interview-with-natalie-bennett-105384> on 13 June 2015.

stance of Labour towards UKIP, successfully quadrupled their total vote share at the 2015 General Election and consolidated their position amongst the second tier of British parties. The Greens are now a party of choice for those on the left wing who are disenchanted by traditional politics and rally around a commitment to diversity, minority rights and an actively positive outlook towards immigration. With long-term party de-alignment and the on-going transformation of generational values, so long as the political context remains favourable, the Greens can look forward to 2020 with a vastly increased profile and swelling membership ranks.

This contribution asks five questions. How did developments both within and outside the Green Party affect their performance in the 2015 election? Who was attracted by the Green Party's message? How effective was the Green Party's campaign and policy offer? How can we theoretically explain the rise of the Green Party? What does the future hold for the party?

1. From one hit wonders to professionalised party?

The Green Party that went into the 2015 election campaign was in a completely different position from that of 2010 and was, in many ways, unrecognisable from the same party of just 10 years earlier. The 2015 Green Party, with its single leader and coordinated press strategy, was the result of a painful and long period of transformation that produced a more professionalised and, much to the lament of some of its supporters, more orthodox political party. For nearly 20 years, the Party had lingered in the shadows of its shock 1989 European election performance when the party came from nowhere to claim third place and 15% of the vote. Their success that year resulted from a combination of protest voting and a 'Green Tide' that swept over Europe following post-Chernobyl alarm about environmental degradation, which was exploited in the party's purely ecological and widely acclaimed party political broadcasts.⁵ The Greens' particularly large vote share in the UK was also caused by the remarkable collapse of the SDP–Liberal Alliance, the Liberal Democrats' predecessors. However, their success encouraged Labour and the Conservatives to incorporate environmentalism into their own policies and rhetoric, robbing the Greens of their previous monopoly over ecological matters. Moreover, through the 1990s the Liberal Democrats regrouped to become, alongside the Nationalist parties, the natural protest vote in the West Country, Wales and Scotland, a role later played by UKIP in the south and east of England. Such developments forced the Greens to form policies on non-environmental issues and find a political home to the left of the major parties, depriving them of the opportunity to again be the catch-all protest party they were in 1989.

Such squeezing out, both geographically and in terms of policy, led to a long period of electoral underperformance and party infighting. The Greens failed to

⁵Curtice, J. (1989) 'The 1989 European Election: Protest or Green Tide?' *Electoral Studies*, 8, 217–230.

win more than 5% of the vote at European elections again until 2009. However, the proportional electoral system introduced in 1999 allowed the Greens to elect their first two MEPs, re-elected at the 2004 election. The Greens also won seats at the newly created Greater London Assembly and the entirely independent Scottish Greens won seats in the Scottish Parliament. At General Elections, with the First-Past-The-Post system acting as an institutional barrier, Green progress was glacially slow, increasing from a low of 0.3% in 1997 to 1% in 2005. In 2007, in an attempt to increase the party's electoral appeal, the Greens ditched their previous system of two 'Principal Speakers'—one male and one female—and elected Caroline Lucas, the main proponent of the change, as its first party leader. One Green Party London Assembly Member described the move as a 'naïve and forlorn hope'.⁶ By the 2010 election, the Greens were able to contest 310 Westminster seats, nearly double the tally in 2005. Although their vote share still dropped to 0.9%, the election saw Caroline Lucas become the party's only MP, offering the party unprecedented exposure and proving that voting Green was not necessarily a waste of time in the First-Past-The-Post system.

One year later, the Greens took minority control of Brighton and Hove City Council. The Green administration in the city proved tumultuous, with in-fighting amongst the party's councillors and a week-long strike by rubbish collectors that pitted Lucas against the head of the council, Jason Kitcat. Some claimed that the Greens were divided between far-left 'watermelons', green on the outside and red on the inside, and 'mangoes', green on the outside and Liberal Democrat orange on the inside.⁷ Ultimately, the Greens achieved significant economic and environmental successes in the city, including increased tourism, housing and a strong small and medium-sized enterprises sector.⁸ However, the need to impose £26 million in cuts coupled with the lack of a whipping system on council votes exacerbated any internal tensions within the party. At the 2015 local elections, the Greens lost half of their seats on the council and, with them, the only Green controlled council in the country.

It was the 2011 victory in Brighton that increased Caroline Lucas' confidence in her ability to defend her Westminster seat and, in light of the historic opportunity to gain the protest vote of disgruntled Liberal Democrats, increase Green representation elsewhere. 'I want to ensure that we use the leadership of the Green Party in a strategic way', explained Lucas, as she stepped down from the party leadership,

⁶Jones, J (2007) 'Leading Edge: No', accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/sep/12/guardiansocietysupplement.greenpolitics> on 13 June 2015.

⁷Harris, J. (2013) 'Have the Greens Blown It in Brighton?', accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/dec/15/greens-blown-it-in-brighton> on 13 June 2015.

⁸Thompson, B. (2015) 'Is Brighton a Far Showground for UK Green Party?', accessed at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8500071a-ab9a-11e4-8070-00144feab7de.html#axzz3d4U2ILHW> on 13 June 2015.

‘to help us build momentum and build up our electoral presence’.⁹ Lucas made no bones about her intention to ‘take our message to Lib Dem areas in particular’ where voters are ‘looking for a new home and we want to be able to welcome them’. In her place, Natalie Bennett, an Australian former Guardian journalist, was elected with 42.8% of first preferences—a far cry from the 92.4% of first preferences that Caroline Lucas won when she last ran opposed in 2008. Bennett vowed to fight the government’s cuts, describing them as ‘economically illiterate’¹⁰ and repeatedly campaigned against the ‘pernicious’ and ‘dangerous’ scapegoating of immigrants by both the government and Labour Party, who had followed UKIP in ‘a race to the bottom’.¹¹ By early 2014, the Green Party were still polling between 1 and 3% in the polls but had an increasingly nationally recognised MP, a new leader, a political heartland in Brighton, a virtual monopoly on pro-immigration rhetoric and, in the form of ex-Liberal Democrats, a clear target market for the 2015 election. In short, despite still being considered a fringe party held back by the electoral system, both the Greens’ own fundamentals and the political landscape had not before offered the party a better opportunity at a General Election.

2. Media coverage and ‘the Green Surge’: discovery, scrutiny and decline

In the year prior to the 2015 General Election, no party underwent more dramatic poll fluctuations than the Green Party. How can we explain a party spending over two years at very low poll ratings, then rapidly quintupling its vote share to 10% in just six months, only to see it halved again prior to the election? I argue that, more so than for any other party, media portrayal of the Greens contributed to their notable rise and partial fall. This media coverage followed a pattern familiar to American presidential primary elections, characterised by Sides and Vavreck as ‘discovery, scrutiny and decline’.¹² Like many candidates in US primaries, the Green Party and its leader were relatively unfamiliar to the public. Furthermore, there were a significant number of undecided voters, there was a lengthy long campaign and ‘the challenge for

⁹McCarthy, M. (2012) ‘Green Party leader Caroline Lucas Steps Aside to Aid Fight Against Lib Dems’, accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/green-party-leader-caroline-lucas-steps-aside-to-aid-fight-against-lib-dems-7743513.html> on 13 June 2015.

¹⁰Jowit, J. (2012) ‘Green Party Elects Natalie Bennett as Leader’, accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/sep/03/green-party-natalie-bennett-leader> on 13 June 2015.

¹¹Ramsay, A. (2013) ‘Green Party Leader Slams Immigrant Scapegoating’, accessed at <http://brightgreenscotland.org/index.php/2013/07/green-party-leader-slams-immigrant-scapegoating/> on 13 June 2015.

¹²Sides, J. and Vavreck, L. (2013) *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

reporters [was] that the campaign may not produce newsworthy events or moments every day'¹³ These factors combined to create three starkly distinct stages of media coverage of the Green Party—'discovery', 'scrutiny' and 'decline'.

According to Sides and Vavreck the process of discovery begins when a candidate, or in our case, a party, 'who had previously attracted little new coverage did or said something [...] judged to be novel, important and therefore newsworthy'.¹⁴ Three unprecedented events overlapped to offer the Greens a boost in coverage. First, David Cameron insisted in early May 2014 that the Greens should be included in any General Election debates and compared them to UKIP. Second, the number of voters intending to vote Green quickly swelled to 5%. Third, there was some progress in the 2014 European and local elections. At the European contest, the Greens increased their seats from two to three, despite a 1% fall in vote share to 7%. The Greens made modest advances in the local elections, gaining 23 seats, and made a breakthrough in some traditionally Labour areas, becoming the official opposition in Liverpool, Solihull, Islington, Lewisham and Norwich. Most tantalisingly, the Greens also secured over 45% of the vote in two seats in Bristol, opening up the possibility of a second Westminster seat. These three events led to unprecedented media coverage through the summer as news outlets repeatedly described the Greens as a potential 'UKIP of the Left'.¹⁵ Figure 12.1 indicates the growth in numbers in 2014 intending to vote Green.

During the discovery phase 'polls and news coverage reinforced each other, as good poll numbers became a rationale for additional coverage [...] suggesting the candidate's strength and potential viability'.¹⁶ Such positivity was certainly a hallmark of the Green's discovery phase, which increased in intensity throughout the autumn as newspapers proclaimed: 'Potential support for the Greens outweighs potential support for UKIP',¹⁷ 'Rise of Green Party and UKIP [...] have killed the old order and all bets are off', the Greens are the 'third insurgent force',¹⁸ 'A new

¹³Sides and Vavreck, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*, p. 42.

¹⁴Sides and Vavreck, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*, p. 43.

¹⁵Coates, S. (2014) 'Greens Turn into 'UKIP of the Left' as They Steal Protest Vote from Lib Dems', accessed at <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article4140426.ece> on 12 June 2015; *The Economist* (2014) 'A UKIP of the Left', accessed at <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21616997-green-party-embraces-left-wing-populism-ukip-left> on 12 June 2015.

¹⁶Sides and Vavreck, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*, pp. 44–45.

¹⁷Eaton, G. (2014) 'Potential Support for the Greens Outweighs Potential Support for UKIP', accessed at <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/11/potential-support-greens-outweighs-potential-support-ukip> on 12 June 2015.

¹⁸Helm, T. (2014) '2015 General Election Could Be the Most Unpredictable Vote in Living Memory', accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/dec/27/2015-general-election-unpredictable-green-party-ukip> on 12 June 2015.

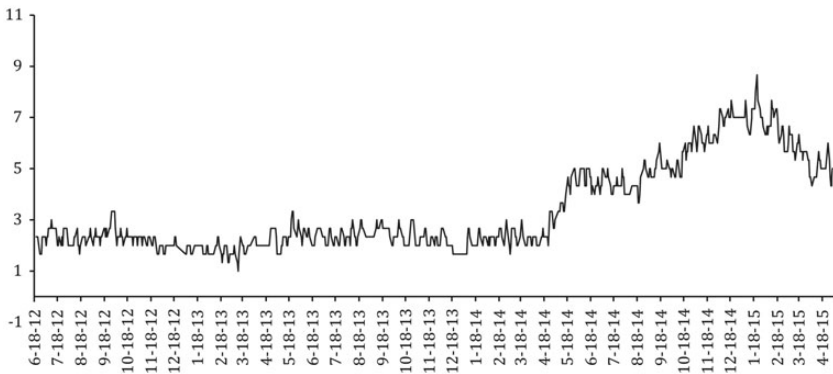


Figure 12.1 Percentage of electors planning on voting for the Green Party, 2012–2015.
Source: YouGov/*The Sun*

“people’s army”? How the Greens could be set to become the new UKIP,¹⁹ ‘Here come the Greens’²⁰ and British politics is now a ‘five-party system.’²¹ Two further events heightened media interest in the Greens. First, the party’s annual conference saw direct attacks by both Caroline Lucas and Natalie Bennett on the Labour Party’s left-wing credentials and paid little heed to environmentalism.²² Despite the Greens’ long-standing left-wing economic commitments, commentators such as the *Independent* interpreted the emphasis on social justice as a ‘change of hue’ and an ‘electoral calculation’, adding to the left-wing populist insurgency narrative.²³ Second, the decision by broadcasters to not include the Greens in the General Election debates in October was widely interpreted as a legitimate grievance

¹⁹Bentley, G. (2014) ‘A New “People’s Army”? How the Greens Could Be Set to Become the New UKIP’, accessed at <http://www.cityam.com/1416586707/new-peoples-army-how-greens-could-be-set-become-new-ukip> on 12 June 2015.

²⁰Payne, S. (2014) ‘Green Party Up to 11 Per Cent in Latest Ashcroft Poll’, accessed at <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/01/green-party-on-11-per-cent-in-latest-ashcroft-poll/> on 12 June 2015.

²¹Goldhill, O. (2014) ‘Open Thread: Can British Politics Survive in a Five-Party System?’, accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/11153469/Open-thread-Can-British-politics-survive-in-a-five-party-system.html> on 12 June 2015.

²²Dennison, J. (2014) ‘Though the Green Party’s Popularity May Continue to Rise, It Is Too Ideological to Become a ‘UKIP of the Left’’, accessed at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/though-the-green-partys-popularity-may-continue-to-rise-it-is-too-ideological-to-become-a-ukip-of-the-left/> on 13 June 2015.

²³*The Independent* (2014) ‘Turning Red: A Change of Hue Has Helped the Green Party Win Support’, accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/turning-red-a-change-of-hue-has-helped-the-green-party-win-support-9710056.html> on 12 June 2015.

by the media²⁴ and public alike, with an ICM opinion poll showing 80% in favour of Green inclusion²⁵ and 280,000 people signing an online petition demanding the Greens' presence.²⁶ Moreover, the media actively adopted the 'Green Surge' label to describe the Greens improving poll ratings and membership numbers.²⁷ In short, the last eight months of 2014 saw the Green Party receive unprecedented and largely positive media coverage. This coincided with a subsequent polling boost up to 10% as commentators enthusiastically greeted the potential for a second 'populist' insurgency party in their 2015 General Election narrative.

The enthusiasm did not last. Once the candidate [in our case, the Green Party] seemed 'serious' enough to pay attention to, that candidate was then subjected to increased scrutiny from opponents and the news media.²⁸ This scrutiny period is characterised by deeper delving into personal histories, issue positions and harsher questioning. All of these applied to the Greens from late January until late March, during which the change of tone right across the media was as rapid as it was uniform. Between 21–26 January, the *Spectator*, *Financial Times*, *Independent* and *This Week*—all of which had previously eagerly heralded the 'UKIP of the Left'—described the Greens' policy proposals, respectively, as 'completely bonkers',²⁹ 'hippie gap year',³⁰ 'daft',³¹ a 'joke'

²⁴Dunt, I. (2014) 'Why Aren't the Greens in the TV Election Debate?', accessed at <http://www.politics.co.uk/blogs/2014/10/13/why-aren-t-the-greens-in-the-tv-election-debate> on 12 June 2015.

²⁵Wintour, P. (2014) 'Four-Fifths of Public Want Green Party in TV Leaders' Debates—Poll', accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/dec/17/poll-green-party-leaders-election-debates> on 12 June 2015.

²⁶Change.org (2014) 'Include the Green Party in the TV Leaders' Debates ahead of the 2015 General Election', accessed at <https://www.change.org/p/bbc-itv-channel-4-sky-include-the-green-party-in-the-tv-leaders-debates-ahead-of-the-2015-general-election> on 12 June 2015.

²⁷Harris, J. (2015) 'The Green Surge: Is This the Party That Will Decide the Election?', accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/21/green-surge-party-that-will-decide-election> on 12 June 2015.

²⁸Sides and Vavreck, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*, p. 44.

²⁹West, E. (2015) 'Welcome to the Completely Bonkers World of the Green Party Manifesto', accessed at <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/01/welcome-to-the-bonkers-world-of-the-green-party-manifesto/> on 12 June 2015.

³⁰Ganesh, J. (2015) 'Greens Contemplate Life Beyond the Fringe', accessed at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/529f5f22-a240-11e4-bbb8-00144feab7de.html#axzz3cmU0eQKS> on 12 June 2015.

³¹Birrell, I. (2015) 'Labour Should Expose the Greens' daftness—Not Flirt with Them', accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/labour-should-expose-the-greens-daftness-not-flirt-with-them-10001620.html> on 12 June 2015.

and 'loony'.³² It was during this same four days that leader Natalie Bennett was 'skewed'³³ in a 'car crash interview' on the BBC's *Daily Politics*. Interviewer Andrew Neil focused on the finer details of the Greens' policies of a universal basic income, a wealth tax, the removal of immigration controls, a smaller armed force and cutting international trade—positions that the Green leader visibly struggled to defend.³⁴ A month, later, Bennett again struggled to explain Green Party policy in an interview with radio channel LBC, this time regarding the pledge to build 500,000 houses at a cost of £2.7 billion. The leader herself later described the interview as 'excruciating' and explained that she had had a 'mind blank'.³⁵

Throughout February and March, the Greens' poll ratings declined and 'the media had a natural incentive to move on and find a storyline that was novel and more exciting'.³⁶ By the start of the short campaign, on 30 March, the media had already successfully established the narrative that Natalie Bennett was an 'incompetent'³⁷ leader and that the Green Party's policies were ill conceived. This allowed room for some media outlets to take a more forgiving tone towards the Green Party, despite its leader's now widely recognised shortcomings.³⁸ Media attention had already begun to turn to the contenders for Prime Minister and the SNP, leaving the post-decline Greens to plateau in the polls at around 5% until the election. Indeed, even the set piece election debates, two of which Natalie Bennett took part in, failed to raise much interest in the Green Party as all eyes were fixed on Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish

³²Horne, N. (2015) 'Election 2015: How Long Can This Green Party Joke Last?', accessed at <http://www.theweek.co.uk/election-2015/62247/election-2015-how-long-can-this-green-party-joke-last> on 15 June 2015.

³³Hutton, W. (2015) 'The Greens, Chaotic as They Are, Give a Lesson to the Main Parties', accessed at <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/01/watch-natalie-bennett-demonstrates-how-green-policies-dont-add-up/> on 12 June 2015.

³⁴Payne, S. (2015) 'Watch: Natalie Bennett Demonstrates How Green Policies Don't Add Up', accessed at <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/01/watch-natalie-bennett-demonstrates-how-green-policies-dont-add-up/> on 15 June 2015.

³⁵LBC (2015) 'Incredibly Awkward Interview with Natalie Bennett', accessed at <http://www.lbc.co.uk/incredibly-awkward-interview-with-natalie-bennett-105384> on 12 June 2015.

³⁶Sides and Vavreck, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*, p. 45.

³⁷Holehouse, M. (2015) 'Can Natalie Bennett Win Back the Greens?', accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/green-party/11453478/Can-Natalie-Bennett-win-back-the-Greens.html> on 13 June 2015.

³⁸Bennett, A. (2015) 'Natalie Bennett May Be Bad at Interviews, But At Least She Doesn't Think She's Jesus', accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/11534749/Natalie-Bennett-may-be-bad-at-interviews-but-at-least-she-doesnt-think-shes-Jesus.html> on 13 June 2015.

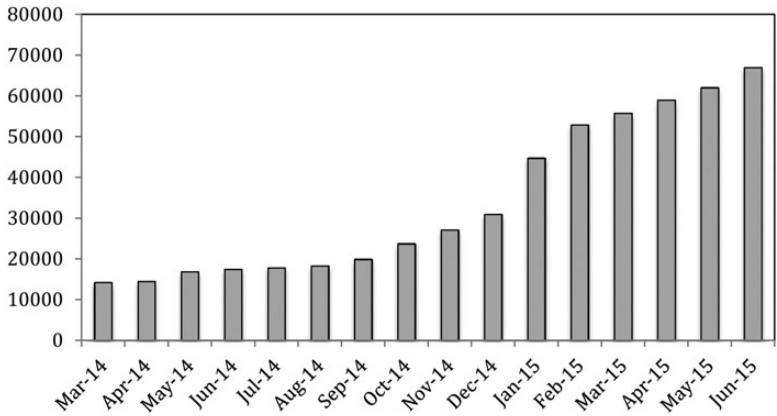


Figure 12.2 Green Party membership, March 2014—June 2015. Source: <http://www.channel4.com/news/green-party-membership-growth-ukip-natalie-bennett>

Nationalists. Perhaps the most active interest that the media took in the Greens during the short campaign was the informal alliance during the televised debates between Bennett, Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood and Sturgeon, who urged English voters to vote Green.³⁹

Ultimately, the ‘Green Surge’ in the polls proved temporary. The Green Party performed a useful role for journalists who were eager for another UKIP-esque story of an insurgent party dismantling the traditional political order. Furthermore, media outlets needed political stories between the European elections and the start of the long campaign in late December. After this point, the media dramatically increased their criticism of the Greens, with party leader Natalie Bennett being a favourite target, before losing interest altogether. This pattern can best be described as ‘discovery, scrutiny and decline’. The party eventually returned to the same poll ratings it had held just after the European Parliament elections. At the General Election, the Green Party received a still very impressive 3.8% far beyond their 0.9% in 2010. The Greens also had the third best improvement in percentage point gain, with a 2.8% increase, behind UKIP and the SNP, but ahead of Labour and the Conservatives. However, the ‘Green Surge’ and its accompanying media profile did have one potentially longer lasting legacy. The Green Party saw its membership swell in numbers, throughout the entire year before the election and particularly during December 2014, just before the media began scrutinising the Greens more rigorously (Figure 12.2).

³⁹Simon, N. (2015) ‘Nicola Sturgeon Urges English to Vote Green or “Progressive” Labour’, accessed at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/16/nicola-sturgeon-urges-english-to-vote-green-or-progressive-labour_n_6876950.html on 12 June 2015.

3. Who votes Green and why: leftists, environmentalists or protest voters?

The Green Party went from unprecedented popularity to unprecedented scrutiny in early 2015. Although the party leadership's long held leftist economic views⁴⁰ received criticism, the media failed to mention that the Greens also proposed a range of consistently popular policies, such as renationalisation of the railways, increasing the minimum wage, removing the profit motive from the NHS, as well as opposition to fracking, HS2 and tuition fees. Besides their role as an environmentalist party, they also began to carve themselves a niche as the only party with a clearly non-conciliatory approach to UKIP's anti-immigration rhetoric and an outright rejection of austerity as a fiscal policy. With such an expansive agenda, the Greens had the potential to appeal to a number of different sections of the electorate and indeed their membership and polling figures are in a far better position than they were five years ago. What is less clear is the profile of those voting for Natalie Bennett and Caroline Lucas' party. What is the background of Green voters? Are Green voters of the far-left or are they disgruntled with the mainstream parties? Do they sincerely vote for the Greens' environmental and economic policies or is their vote a protest? And, if the latter, what are they protesting about?

Before turning to the attitudinal drivers of Green Party support at the 2015 General Election, it is worth comparing the socio-demographic background of Green voters with the literature's expectations of the social makeup of Green voters. Supporters of green parties in Britain and elsewhere have long been characterised as relatively young, well-educated and in professional jobs.⁴¹ More recently scholars have noted the disproportionate numbers of socio-cultural specialists and students voting for green parties, as well as green voters' tendency to live in urban areas and identify as non-religious.⁴² As shown in Table 12.1, the Green Party's voters at the 2015 General Election seamlessly fit this picture. A majority of Green voters were under the age of 36 and nearly 17% were students, over double the proportion of any other party. The Greens' voters were also the most likely of any party to hold a university degree, though only slightly more so than Liberal Democrat voters. In terms of employment, voters for Natalie Bennett's party were more likely than voters of any other party to be in professional or

⁴⁰Dennison, J. (2014) 'Though the Green Party's Popularity May Continue to Rise, It Is too Ideological to Become a "UKIP of the Left"', accessed at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/though-the-green-partys-popularity-may-continue-to-rise-it-is-too-ideological-to-become-a-ukip-of-the-left/> on 13 June 2015.

⁴¹Lowe P. and Rudig, W. (1986) 'Political Ecology and the Social Sciences: The State of the Art', *British Journal of Political Science*, 16, 513–550.

⁴²Dolezal, M. (2010) 'Exploring the Stabilization of a Political Force: The Social and Attitudinal Basis of Green Parties in the Age of Globalization', *West European Politics*, 33, 534–552.

Table 12.1 Socio-demographic background of each party's voters at the 2015 General Election

	Greens	Labour	Lib Dems	Cons	UKIP	Electorate
18–35	54.8	32.3	32.0	27.6	18.8	31.8
36–55	27.9	34.9	30.7	30.2	35.4	32.6
56+	17.3	32.8	37.4	42.2	45.9	53.6
Routine/Semi-Routine workers	13.3	18.9	10.6	11.9	19.2	16.0
Lower supervisory/technical	2.4	8.3	4.2	6.3	9.9	7.2
Professional/management	60.9	44.8	60.6	52.3	42.3	48.5
University degree	42.5	26.9	39.3	26.1	13.4	26.0
If degree, humanities	41.9	39.5	37.2	29.3	21.7	33.9
Not religious	68.6	45.6	50.1	37.2	41.7	44.6
Students	16.8	4.5	7.3	4.1	1.4	5

Source: British Election Study, May 2015.

managerial positions, though again this figure was comparable to that of the Liberal Democrats' voters. The education of the Greens also suggests that they will go on to socio-cultural industries as their university-educated voters were the most likely to have specialised in the humanities. Finally, Green voters were by far the most likely to describe themselves as non-religious, with over two-thirds doing so.

During the 2015 General Election, the Green Party's policies were most commonly described as 'far left'.⁴³ Indeed, the Green Party's manifesto was clearly far to the left of Britain's centre-left Labour Party. While the Greens called for a maximum wage, a universal basic income and increases in social spending, Labour vowed to cut spending, clamp down on welfare and halt any borrowing in the next Parliament. Yet the clear left-right divide between the parties was not reflected in their voters as both Labour and Green supporters placed themselves very similarly on the left-right spectrum, as shown in Figure 12.3. On specific economic policy issues, those voting Green in 2015 tended to be very slightly *less* left wing than Labour voters: 71% of Greens believed that the government should redistribute incomes, a very slightly lower figure than the 74% of Labour voters, but significantly higher than the 53% of British electors who supported such redistribution.⁴⁴

⁴³*The Economist* (2015) 'Verdant Pastures', accessed at <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21651879-northern-europe-environmental-parties-are-claiming-radical-space-left-vacant-moderate> on 13 June 2015. Wigmore, T (2015) "'This Leftwing Label Is Potentially Unhelpful': The Greens on Why They Missed Their Moment", accessed at <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/06/leftwing-label-potentially-unhelpful-greens-why-they-missed-their-moment> on 13 June 2015. Hall, Z. (2015) 'The Green Should Lose Natalie Bennett and Appoint Caroline Lucas as Leader', accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/politics-blog/11619860/The-Greens-should-lose-Natalie-Bennett-and-appoint-Caroline-Lucas-as-leader.html> on 13 June 2015.

⁴⁴British Election Study, May 2015.

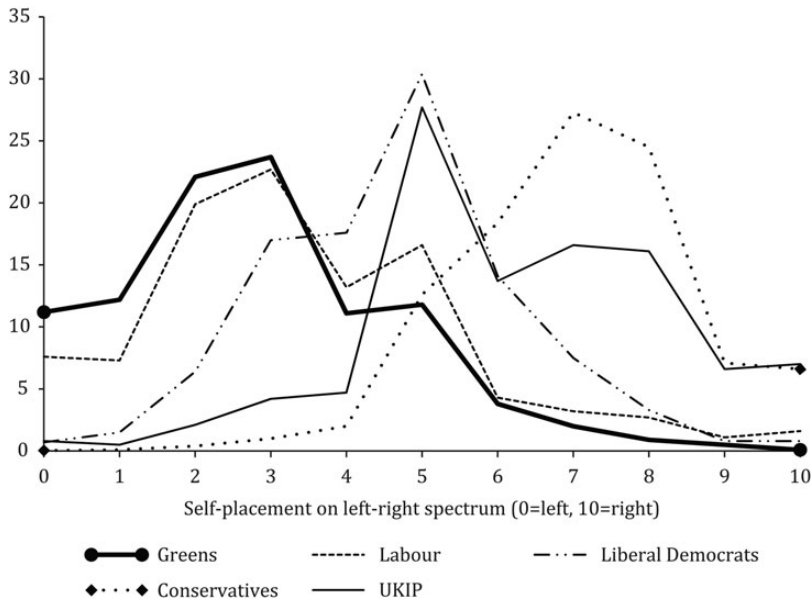


Figure 12.3 Left-right self-placement by vote intention. Source: British Election Study, May 2015

Although Green voters are highly similar to Labour Party voters on the traditional left-right spectrum, it is when respondents are asked what were once collectively designated as post-material issues that a clear divide emerges.⁴⁵ Knutsen and, more recently, Kriesi *et al.*⁴⁶ have divided these issues between ‘new politics’ coming from the 1968 movements (environment and liberty-authority) and those on the more recent integration–demarcation divide arising from the cultural and political effects of globalisation (immigration and supranational organisations). Green voters’ positions on ‘new politics’ values are obvious—namely a strong advocacy of environmentalism, the rights of women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals and a disdain for traditional pillars of authority. On contemporary integration–demarcation issues, Green Party voters are expected to support immigration as ‘contrary to the traditional left, whose views of equality were primarily focused on class

⁴⁵ Inglehart, R. (1977) *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

⁴⁶ Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschier, S. and Frey, T. (2006), ‘Globalization and the Transformation of the National Political Space. Six European Countries Compared’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 45, 921–956; Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschier, S. and Frey, T. (2008) *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Knutsen, O. (1995) ‘Party Choice’. In van Deth, J. and Scarbrough, E. (eds) *The Impact of Values. Beliefs in Government Volume Four*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 461–491.

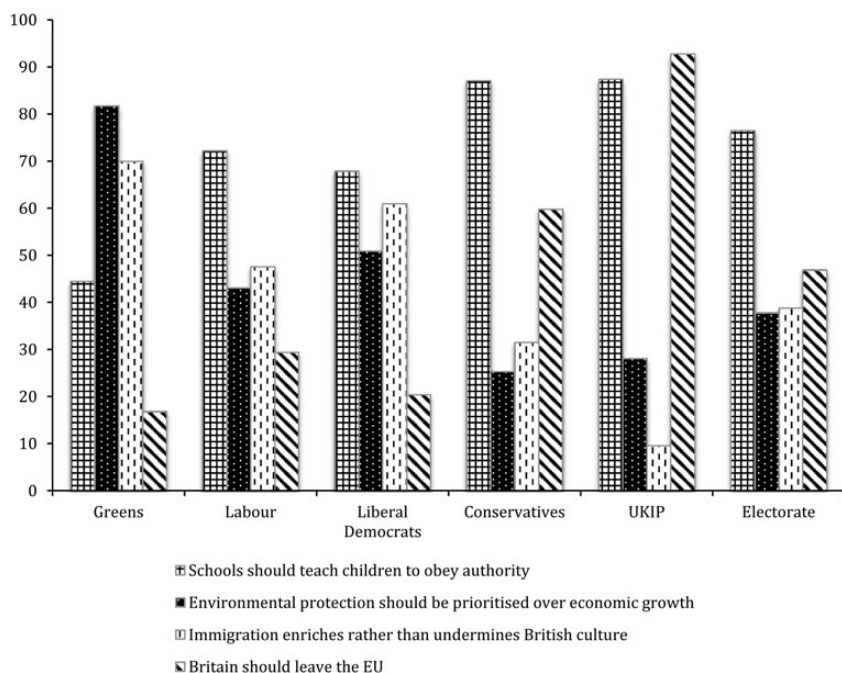


Figure 12.4 Percentage agreeing with each political statement, by General Election vote.
 Source: British Election Study, March–May 2015

antagonisms, the Green interpretation of equality is related to the welfare of all marginalised groups, including migrants.⁴⁷ Less clear are Green attitudes towards supranational governance. Greens should be torn between their decentralised, participatory vision of democracy, which is contrary to the European Union's structure, and their 'cosmopolitan orientation',⁴⁸ which underpins support for the 'cultural opening of European societies, as they do not see much importance in the conservation of their countries' national identities and traditional ways of life'.⁴⁹

How do Green voters' policy attitudes compare to the expectations of the literature? As shown in Figure 12.4, on all issues, those voting for the Green Party express both more 'New Left' and 'integration' attitudes than Liberal Democrat or, especially, Labour Party voters—who they position themselves alongside on the traditional left-right spectrum. Only 45% of Green Party voters believe that schools should teach children to obey authority, compared with a much higher 72% of Labour

⁴⁷Dolezal, 'Exploring the Stabilization of a Political Force', p. 542.

⁴⁸Kitschelt, H. (1994) *The Transformation of European Social Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 227.

⁴⁹Dolezal, 'Exploring the Stabilization of a Political Force', p. 542.

Table 12.2 Issue salience for Green voters and the electorate

Green voters		Electorate		'Old' Green voters		'New' Green voters	
NHS	20.0	Economy	28.7	Environment	20.8	NHS	22.3
Economy	17.7	Immigration	26.8	Economy	17.6	Economy	20.8
Inequality	13.6	NHS	15.8	NHS	16.3	Inequality	13.9
Environment	11.5	Public Services	3.9	Inequality	9.9	Environment	9.3
Poverty	7	Poverty	3.6	Poverty	6.9	Immigration	6.0
Public Services	6.6	Unemployment	2.7	Housing	5.3	Housing	5.1
Immigration	5.4	Housing	2.7	Education	3.8	Unemployment	4.9
Housing	5.1	Inequality	2.5	Public Services	3.7	Education	4.7
Education	2.3	Election	2.5	Immigration	3.2	Public Services	4.3
Unemployment	2.2	Terrorism	2.0	Crime	2	Poverty	2.7
Other	8.7	Other	8.9	Other	10.6	Other	6.1

Q. As far as you're concerned, what is the SINGLE MOST important issue facing the country at the present time?
Source: British Election Study, May 2015.

voters. Indeed, Green Party voters were by far the least likely of each party's voters to agree with this statement. Regarding environmental protection, unsurprisingly, Green Party voters were the most likely to agree that the ecological well-being should be prioritised over economic growth, at 82% with a large divergence from Labour Party voters, less than half of whom thought the same. Regarding immigration, Green Party voters had the most positive outlook, with 7 in 10 believing immigration enriched British culture, which was far higher than Labour voters, on 48%, though not that much higher than Liberal Democrat voters on 61%. Finally, Green Party voters were by far the least likely to believe that the UK should leave the European Union—even less so than the traditionally pro-European Liberal Democrats. It would seem that, for Green voters, a commitment to transnational cosmopolitanism outweighs concerns over any democratic shortcomings of the EU. Overall, despite Green voters not being significantly more left-wing than Labour voters in the traditional sense, on issues of 'post-material', 'new' or 'integration-demarcation' politics, there are consistent and striking divides.

The attitudinal similarities and differences between Green voters and voters of other left-wing parties are apparent. However, it is not clear whether Green voters give certain issues greater significance than others, and if these are classic left-right issues of resources or newer 'post-material' concerns. In Table 12.2, we can see that the Greens' top three most important issues are all classic left-right issues. For Green voters, immigration is only the seventh most important issue facing Britain, whereas for the electorate as a whole it is the second most important issue, just behind the economy. Indeed, over half of Britons see either the economy or immigration as their single most salient topic, whereas Green Party voters' concerns are

far more disparate. Interestingly, only 11% of Green voters see the environment as the most important issue, behind the NHS, the economy and inequality. However, when we separate Greens between ‘old’ Green voters, who were already planning on voting for the Green Party in March 2014, and ‘new’ Green voters, who, before the European Parliament elections, were planning on voting for another party or had not decided who to vote for yet, there is a clear divide on issue salience. To the Greens’ longest-standing supporters, the environment was the most important issue affecting Britain in May 2015, whereas recent recruits to Bennett’s party were more concerned by the NHS, the economy and inequality, with less than 1 in 10 considering the environment the most important issue. As the Greens improved in the polls, the most strident environmentalists made up a decreasing share of Green voters. By the time of the General Election, it is fair to conclude that, though Green voters stood out from voters of other left-wing parties in their attitudes towards ‘new’ political issues, they were still most concerned by the classic left-right struggle for resources.

Green voters are not significantly more left-wing than Labour voters on economic issues nor are they primarily driven by environmental concerns. We have seen, however, that they are distinguished from Labour voters on ‘post-material’ attitudes. In fact, socially and attitudinally the group of voters closest to the Greens are Liberal Democrats and the similarity does not stop there. Over half of 2015 Green voters supported the Liberal Democrats in 2010 and around one-third voted for the former junior coalition partner in both 2005 and 2010. There are a number of ways of interpreting this. First, Liberal Democrats and Green voters traditionally hold similar socio-demographic profiles. Both are likely to be university educated and to work in professional or managerial jobs, though Green voters are younger and hold more left-wing economic opinions. Second, the Liberal Democrats were, until the 2010 election, the protest vote of many on the left. After entering government, they lost this niche and, subsequently, saw their poll ratings plummet. Third, the Greens entered the 2015 election with certain policy promises that they once owned by the Liberal Democrats—for example, ending university tuition fees. These three issues made the Greens the natural alternative for disgruntled Liberal Democrats who from 2010 onwards had no centre-left party with whom to register their protest.

Indeed, by entering government, the Liberal Democrats almost certainly lost the support of eventual Green Party voters, whose negative attitudes to British democracy and the House of Commons differ sharply with those voting Liberal Democrat in 2015. As shown in Figure 12.5, nearly three-quarters of Green Party voters are dissatisfied with British democracy and over 7 in 10 do not trust MPs. Greens, like UKIP voters, score far higher on both issues than voters of the major three ‘governing’ parties. The increase in vote share that the Greens secured in 2015 was partially thanks to their ability to win over the most ‘post-material’, left-wing Liberal Democrat protest voters.

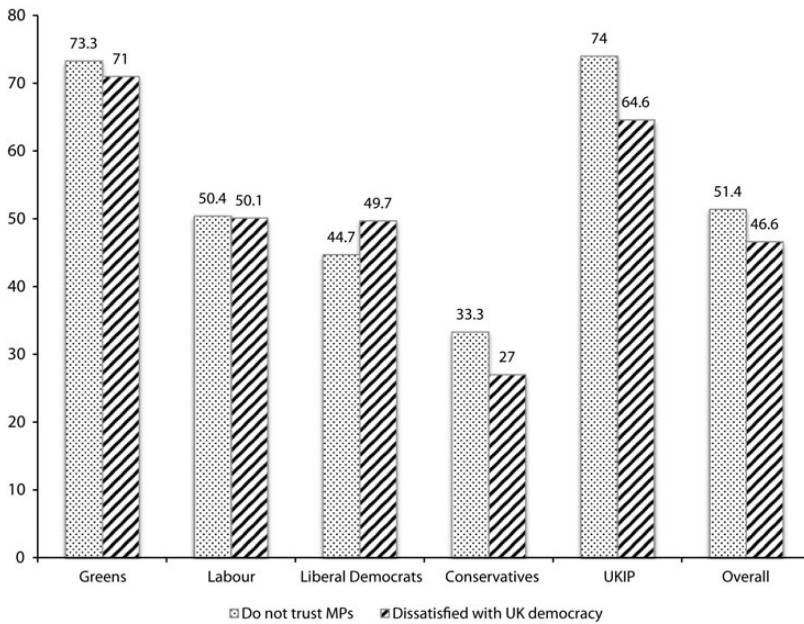


Figure 12.5 Percentage of each party's voters who do not trust MPs in general and who are dissatisfied with UK democracy. *Source:* British Election Study, March 2015

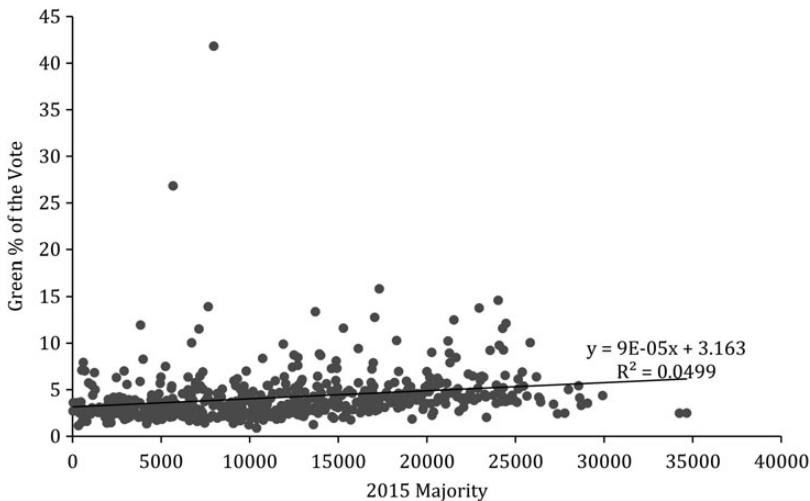


Figure 12.6 Green Party vote share by constituency marginality in the 2015 General Election. *Source:* Author's calculations

Finally, how much did constituency level effects determine one's chance of voting Green in 2015? The most obvious electoral impediment for the Greens has always been Britain's majoritarian electoral system that discourages voters

from 'wasting' their votes on parties that have no chance of winning in their constituencies. We would expect this effect to be particularly strong in constituencies in which the race between the top two candidates is close, both because of voters' strategic calculations and because of the increased campaigning that occurs in such 'marginal' seats. Indeed, as shown in Figure 12.6, the effects of constituency marginality negatively affect the Green vote share. A seat with a 10,000 vote greater margin between the top two candidates can be predicted to return a 0.9% higher Green Party vote share.

4. Conclusion

Several forces came together to allow the Green Party to dramatically increase its vote share at the 2015 General Election. First, the ongoing professionalisation of the party coupled with its success in securing its own political fiefdom in Brighton put the party in a stable position that allowed for a greater media profile and the potential to expand its ambitions to other parts of the country. When the golden opportunity of a Liberal Democrat breakdown occurred, the party was able to capitalise. Over half of 2015 Green voters voted Liberal Democrat in 2010 and, even now, the similarities between the two parties' voters are strong. Both parties appeal to students and university-educated professionals with 'post-material' values on authority, minority rights, environmentalism, immigration and the EU. The Greens won over those voters most attached to these norms, not least because the Labour Party's rhetoric had become increasingly sympathetic towards the UKIP-led anti-immigration backlash. In terms of immigration, the Greens could be summarised as a 'backlash against a backlash'. Throughout 2014 and 2015, most new Green voters, who were less concerned about the environment than longer standing Green voters, had originally planned on voting Labour. The Greens appealed to those with traditionally left-wing views that shared Labour voters' attitudes to redistribution yet 'looked' more like Liberal Democrats in everything except their youth and disenchantment with traditional politics. Such disenchantment meant that those ex-Liberal Democrats who voted Green in 2015 were probably lost to Nick Clegg the moment he entered government.

Party professionalisation and a favourable political context combined to boost the Greens' polling performance in the period after the 2014 European Elections. The media were happy to follow and build on a narrative of the 'UKIP of the left' throughout the summer. During this initial 'discovery' period, media attention on the Greens was enthusiastic and positive, with far more regard to their potential electoral performance than their policies. This unprecedented coverage led to a 'Green Surge' in polling. However, by early 2015, the media abruptly took on a far more critical tone, catching the occasionally amateurish party off guard and leading to a number of 'car crash' interviews during this 'scrutiny' period. By

March, support had declined, flattening out at around 5% during the short campaign as media attention turned elsewhere. The main legacy of this cycle in media coverage was a boom in party membership, nearly quadrupling in a year.

Finally, long-term changes to Britain's demographics and politics worked in favour of the Green Party. Not only is generational replacement increasing the number of voters who share the Greens' 'post-material' beliefs but, as partisan de-alignment continues to fragment the party system, those voters who remain engaged have become more critical and their voting behaviour less predictable. For more voters than ever before, in 2015 Natalie Bennett's party was attractive because it provided the best product in an increasingly crowded market. So long as Labour continues to adopt increasingly anti-immigration rhetoric in an attempt to win back its working class support base, there will be growing space for a left-wing and unashamedly pro-immigration, pro-minority rights party like the Greens. Furthermore, so long as the Liberal Democrats remain tainted by their term in government, the Greens should be able to retain a considerable portion of the left-wing protest vote. However, the benefit that the Green Party receives, like UKIP, from being united on issues like immigration may increasingly attract a divided support base on the traditional left-right spectrum. Already commentators have taken opportunities to identify a split between centrist 'mangoes' and far-left 'watermelons'. Overall, depending on what narrative the media sets between now and the 2020 General Election, the Greens may increasingly be seen, in England and Wales at least, as the fifth party of British politics.